

The Ending of Things :

A DISCOURSE ON "NON-SELF"

An edited version of the last talk of the 1999 Rains Retreat at Bodhinyana Monastery, Western Australia.

Whatever arises passes away.

This is the last talk of the rains retreat for 1999. It seems just a few days ago that I gave the first talk of this rains retreat. Now it's almost over. That is the nature of things: to rise and fall. To some people that creates a great deal of fear as if they've got no place to hold onto, as if even the ground beneath them is moving, is disintegrating, so there's no place to sit. And that indeed is the nature of our lives. At first we fear impermanence or Anicca but, after a while, when we understand the Lord Buddha's teachings (Dhamma), Anicca becomes a great comfort to us and a tool which we can use to accommodate the moods of life. There are times when we are confused. There are times when we are healthy. There are times when we are sad. And there are times when we are sick. This rise and fall is the very nature of life.

Once a person understands the rise and fall of all phenomena, experiencing the worst that human life can give does not make one tremble. You know that it's something passing just like the wind passes your face. You don't know where that wind comes from, and you can't tell where that wind is going. All you know is that wind is blowing. You don't know when that wind is going to end, nor if it will get stronger or weaker. Like the weather, the forecast for moods is "changeable".

All feelings that arise in the mind and all feelings which impinge upon the body, all of these, arise and pass away. Even though you try as best as you can in your life to control these feelings, to try only to get the pleasant ones and to ward off the painful ones, you never know where they are coming from or when they will go.

All Is On Fire

You're all old enough now, and you all have had sufficient experience, to have discovered that you cannot control these feelings (Vedana). They're beyond you. They just come when they want to, and they disappear when they want to. They're subject to laws of nature rather than our control. That's the message contained in the Adittapariyaya Sutta ("The Discourse on Fire" - SN,35,42). Essentially all experience is on fire, like flames raging higher and then receding to become small, going out and then flaring up again. That is the nature of our experience. If you have any sickness, then you know the nature of sickness is to die down and then flare up again.

It's like that with the sickness of the mind. There are times when your mind is healthy and everything looks so wonderful, and there are times when it is depressed and fed up, and you want to go somewhere else. This is just the nature of the mind, that's all - just the worldly winds blowing through it. All the Thai Meditation Masters say not to follow those moods, but to stand your ground and to be just like an unshakeable rock, where the winds can blow as hard as they can but you don't even quiver at all. This is the sign of someone who understands the Dhamma [1], someone who doesn't tremble or get blown around. A person who hasn't got a foundation in the Dhamma gets blown all over the place. When you have your roots stuck in the Dhamma then you don't get moved by the rising and falling of different phenomena in the world.

To be able to see those rising and falling phenomena is just seeing that things come and go. We have to look at this thing which we call experience. But not just experience, we have to look at the experiencer as well. I've used the analogy before of experience being like a television program on a television set. Often human beings, Buddhists included, want only to observe the content of the screen rather than the screen itself. All they want to look at is something out there rather than looking inside. This tendency is recognized by all philosophies and religions that have a mystical introspective inclination. People don't seem to go

inside enough. They stop short of the goal. The whole idea of this investigation is to go deeper, and to go to the very core of that which we call the phenomena of "world", "self", "God", "existence" or whatever.

Penetrating Beneath the Surface of Things

Instead of going inside, human beings tend to go outside. They go outside of "this" and on to something else in the future. They step ahead of themselves rather than step inside of themselves, and this is why human beings - even meditators - very often don't get the pure wisdom of the Dhamma. That Dhamma 2 lies right in the very moment, in the heart, in the center of all this.

As I've said, we often just stop at the surface of things and think that's all there is. We don't go deeper into the very core and see that there's nothing there! It's so important to be able to liberate oneself from the illusion of something permanent that knows the passing and fading away of phenomena, to liberate oneself from the illusion of a permanent solid screen, from the illusion that "you" are always there watching all these things come and go, but "you" don't come and go, "you're" always there. That is the illusion which creates suffering in that world which you inhabit. This is why I've been teaching throughout this rains retreat to develop the mind in Samadhi to such powerful states of sustained attention that you can let the mind rest on one thing

courageously, firmly, without shaking or without wavering, long enough to penetrate its empty nature.

What you want to see is this thing we call experience itself, and to be able to get deep into that you do need the ability to sustain your attention on something very, very subtle. The ordinary experience of life goes so fast that we cannot really discern its nature. It's like going through life in a fast car. We look out of the window and all we can see are just flashes of scenery as we go past. We may go through a town, but we cannot really read the sign posts or read the names of the shops because we are going too fast. As we slow down we can get more information. If we travel on a bicycle we can see much more. If we walk we can see even greater detail. If we stand still as we watch the scenery around us, then we find that we see the most.

Being Still and "Seeing" the Jewel in the Heart of the Thousand-Petal Lotus

If you can sustain your attention on any part of nature long enough, nature opens up to you and reveals its secrets, whether it's watching a leaf on a tree or it's watching the moon in the sky or even watching the finger on your hand. Whatever it is, if you can sustain your attention unmoving and without comment, silent and still, you'll find the object in front of the mind will open up its secrets to you. And you'll see much more in there than you've ever seen before.

It's like the simile that I've used before of the thousand-petal lotus. A thousandpetal lotus closes up at night-time. When the sun's rays hit that lotus at dawn it starts to open, one petal at a time. As long as the sun is heating that petal it will start to open up. Can you imagine how long the sun has to sustain its attention on the lotus to start the inner petals opening up? The sun stands for Samadhi. The lotus can stand for whatever phenomena we are placing our attention on. If we sustain our attention on this lotus, this phenomena, the outermost petals open up revealing the inner petals.

You'll notice as you contemplate in this way, silently holding your attention without moving, that all the old labels disappear. All the old ideas which you had about that thing in front of you, are the "outer petals". They start to disappear when you get to the petals underneath. You start to see things you've never seen before, experiences for which you don't have labels and which are beyond your learned perceptions. Most of our perceptions are just repeating what we already know from when we were told it at school. "Cow", "Dog", "Policeman", "Money", "Car"; all these are just labels which we are taught to attach to the objects in the world. Also, there are labels which we are taught to attach to the objects of the mind: "thought", "feeling", "consciousness" and "self". All these are just that much - learned perceptions.

As we sustain our attention on the mind, we see that all those labels are the outer petals of the lotus. When they open, we know that there is more to this, that there's a deeper reality which is certainly beyond words. If we can keep on sustaining our attention on this thing which we call "the mind", "experience", "the moment", or whatever we wish to call it, without moving, the innermost petals start to manifest and then finally the last, the thousandth petal, the innermost-of-the-innermost, opens up and reveals what is called "the jewel in the heart of the lotus" The beautiful jewel of Dhamma which is emptiness - nothing there! This will not be what you expect in the heart of a lotus, but that's what's there - the emptiness of all phenomena. Once you see that, it gives you a great shock that wakes you from the deep slumber of illusion.

Emptiness to the Core

In the centre of all things is a great space of nothingness, of emptiness. All around are these fabrications (Sankharas), and it's only these fabrications which surround this empty core of nothingness. It's these fabrications that we take to be real, which we take to be "me", which we take to be "mine", and which we take to be a "self". All of these things are what delude us. It's hard to go that deep inside the mind. There comes a time when we almost get to the innermost petal - but not the very innermost - and we think that's good enough. As we go deeper into that lotus, the petals are more and more golden, beautiful and brilliant. They are delightful, those innermost petals. Sometimes we come to the most beautiful petal, and we think, "That's it. This must be it! It's so beautiful, so wonderful, so inspiring. This must be the Dhamma!"

However, it's only in the emptiness, in the nothingness, that there can be an end. Ajahn Chah, my teacher, always liked to find the end of things, not things which create more problems and more things to do, but that which stops everything, which finishes the work, and which ends the burden. This is when a person becomes enlightened. Birth is destroyed (Khina Jati). The Holy Life has been lived (Vusitam Brahmachariyam). No more of all this (Napararnitthattayati).

Haven't you had enough of all this yet? Those of you who have had lots of suffering in the rains retreat, join the club. This is suffering. All we are trying to do is to find out that which ends all that suffering and finishes this Holy Life business. We want to end it and to see that the core of nothingness is where it is ended. Imagine what that might be like when you know, because you've seen to the very depth of all things, that there's nothing there. That which you've taken to be consciousness, that which knows, you find that it's completely empty.

The Buddha called the appearance of something solid a magician's trick. The "magician" makes you think that there is something solid in this consciousness [SN,22,95]. But it is just things arising and passing away. That's all there is! That which knows is an empty process. Because it is empty it can stop. If there were something there, knowing would be endless. There is a basic law of physics called the "law of the conservation of energy". Energy can mutate from one type to another as it passes through the whole of Samsara. But if there is nothing there, if consciousness is empty of substance, only then can it stop.

To see that core of consciousness to be empty is liberating. It means that whether you know happiness or you know suffering, whether you know confusion or you know clarity, you realize that this is just empty consciousness playing a game with you, making you think that this is real. When you've actually seen the emptiness of consciousness, it's like finally seeing the television set disappear on which all of this drama of life is carried out.

As I mentioned earlier, I like to use the simile of televisions. Imagine six television sets in line - one is called "sight", one is called "hearing", one is called "smell", one is called "taste", one is called "touch", and the last is called "mind". Only one of these televisions is on at a time - just one, then another and another, flicking into existence and then out. It's easy to see the content on the screens and see the content rise and fall, but the way to become Enlightened is not only to see the content on the screen rise and fall, but to see the whole television set come into existence and then completely disappear.

One of the great advantages of attaining Jhanas is that as soon as you've got into a Jhana five "television sets" have completely vanished - not just popped out of existence for a moment, but popped out of existence for many hours. It's not as if there's nothing on the screen; there's no screen any more! There is no sight. There is no sound. There's not even any hearing. There's no smell. There's no taste. There's no touch. This is because there's no body when you're in Jhana. It is pure mental consciousness. That's why you can sit for long periods of time. The knees don't ache; the back doesn't ache; the nose doesn't itch because it's got hayfever. You've completely left the world.

Five "television sets" disappear, and you've just got this mind left. Be aware though that you can get stuck there. Some people with weak wisdom will think, "That's it - the mind is the ultimate 'television set' that doesn't disappear." However you can either use inference, or you can take those Jhanas deeper, and you can see parts of that last "television set" get hacked away. From First Jhana to Second Jhana you hack away at half the "television set", initial and sustained application of mind (Vitakka and Vicara). From Second to Third to Fourth Jhana you hack away a heap more of that "television set". You hack away at more of the "television set" and you get into the Immaterial Absorptions (Arupa Jhanas). You keep hacking away until you get to cessation (Nirodha Samapatti), when the whole of that last "television set" is gone. Consciousness has disappeared. That which knows has vanished. You come out of that experience, and there is no way that you can miss the meaning. That which we thought to be real, pervasive and stable, that which knows is a mirage!

Sometimes people get afraid when I talk like this, and that's to be expected because I'm challenging the very heart of who they think they are. Challenging it to its very roots. But imagine for a while what it would be like to have no self. To have no self means that all of this happiness and suffering, this pain and pleasure, this delight and frustration which arises in the mind will not worry you any more. Why would it concern us when there is no one there who owns this pain in the body or pleasure in the body? All the frustration, the success or the failure, why would we worry about it? You know these are just things which rise and fall. They're not yours. There's no one to blame, and there's no one to praise. Praise and blame are worldly phenomena (Dhammas). The Buddha said they don't belong to anybody. They just belong to nature.

Praise and blame are great to contemplate. When I was young I always tried to avoid blame like the plague, and I'd only seek praise. If I got blamed I would think there was something wrong with me, and I was quite skillful in trying to please others. But even though I tried my very best, I still got blamed for things which I didn't do. I also noticed that I got praised for things I didn't do as well, but I never complained about that. I would get fed up if someone blamed me unfairly. I really noticed how much of my early life was spent trying to please somebody. I was trying to please my parents, please my teachers at school, please my friends or please my girlfriend. Later on I spent so much time trying to please Ajahn Chah, please Ajahn Sumedho, please the Buddhist Society of Western Australia's management committee, or please the monks who were staying with me. Now I don't care if I please anyone or not. If you've had a rotten rains retreat, I don't care. Ha! Ha! Its just worldly Dhammas; its got nothing to do with me. I take no responsibility if you got it right either. It's praise and blame, that's all. Isn't it wonderful when you see this is not Ajahn Brahm giving the talk? You don't have to worry about what is said, and you don't have to worry about trying to inspire people. It's just the play of Dhammas, that's all it is.

Freedom From Suffering

What I'm trying to say is that when one realizes non-self or anatta, there's a great freedom which comes from letting go of all that concern which caused you suffering. The Lord Buddha said that when there's a self, there are things that belong to it (MN,22). There's my reputation and what people think of me. There's my possessions; there's my body; there's my thoughts, my ideas, my views and there's my meditation. All of these things which begin with "my" happen when we have a self.

Imagine that there is no self. When there's no self, there's no core; there is no me, and there is no mine. Imagine what it's like to have no possessions. I don't just mean physical possessions. I don't just mean that you've got no hut, you've got no robes, you've got no money, you've got no honey or sugar. I mean you've got no body, no arms, no head, no teeth; and you have no thoughts! Thoughts are there but they are not yours. You have no happiness, and you have no suffering. Happiness and suffering come and go, but they are nothing to do with you. There is no one in here. Imagine what it's like to have nothing, truly to be without possessions and to have followed the path of renunciation far deeper than you first thought was possible. You don't just renounce worldly things, you renounce unworldly things too -- all things, any thing! Throw everything away until there's literally nothing left.

Imagine when you have absolutely nothing: no body, no mind, no consciousness. It all just belongs to nature. You give back the deeds of your life to its rightful owner. Nature owns all this, not you. If you could do that, imagine how free you would be. You would have absolutely no worries and no concerns. Whatever happens in the world, nature looks after it. Happiness, suffering, clarity, confusion, whatever occurs is just the play of nature. That's why the Lord Buddha said, when there is not a self then there is nothing belonging to a self. If there is no "mine", there is no craving any more.

Why do you want to grab onto things? To grab onto happiness is to grab onto suffering as well. People are crazy. They grab onto both praise and blame. When someone tells you off and tells you how stupid you are, you grab onto that, "I'm stupid! Why do

they call me stupid? I'm not really stupid". You're just holding onto that. When there is pain in the body you think, "I hurt. This is painful". Why are you holding onto that? You're just making yourself suffer.

Craving is not just for pleasant things. Stupid people will crave for suffering! They just crave for anything because they're into craving. It's like someone going into a shop; they decide they are going to buy something whether they like it or not. They'll even buy rubbish. That's what craving is like. You'll eat anything when you're hungry, and attach to anything when you're stupid and craving - even suffering. This is all because deep inside of us we still think we are there. Therefore we want to do something; we want to get something, and we want to own something. The whole function of having a self, of having an ego, is to do, to possess and to have power over our possessions. Big egos in the world like to be prime ministers, presidents, kings and queens. They like to own so much and to have so much power over everything. The extent of your ego is your desire for power over others. Someone who has got no ego doesn't exert power over others.

I remember some of the great monks that I have known, Enlightened Ones (Arahants) of the Forest Tradition. Sometimes people thought they were fearsome because they would always tell you what to do. But according to my memory they were just so soft and kind. They were freeing you, not controlling you. They gave to you; they never tried to take possession of you. One can even say that the whole purpose of a teacher is to get rid of disciples, not to get more. That's why I try to get rid of each one of you, to make you enlightened and free. That's the purpose of a teacher, not to possess you but to liberate you. The purpose of the Teaching (the Dhamma) is to liberate.

The Driverless Bus

Often when you start to delve into non-self, there comes a time when you don't want to go any further because you're afraid. I'm not talking about ordinary fear; I'm talking about fear that goes to what you take to be your very "core". You're challenging all you ever thought about yourself, and you're undermining your whole essence of existence. Your whole reason to be is being challenged by imagining what it would be like if there were nothing there. If you have the courage and the faith to go through that fear and find that what you were afraid of was nothing, you will receive the most beautiful gift - the gift of freedom. The gift of the ending of things, of the work being finished.

Years ago I gave the simile of "the driverless bus". It's like you're driving through life in a bus, and you get pleasant experiences and unpleasant experiences. You think it's your fault; or you think that it's the driver's fault. "Why is it that the driver doesn't drive into pleasant country and stay there for a long time? Why does he always drive into unpleasant territory and stay there a long time?" You want to find out who is controlling this journey called "my life". Why is it that you experience so much pain and suffering? You want to find out where the driver is, the driver of these five aggregates (Khandhas): body, feeling, perception, mentality and consciousness - the driver of you. After doing a lot of meditation and listening to the Dhamma, you finally go up to where the driver's seat is in the bus, and you find it's empty!

It shocks you at first, but it gives you so much relief to know there's no one to blame. How many people blame somebody when there is suffering? They either blame God, or they blame their parents, or they blame the government, or they blame the weather, or they blame some sickness they have, and in the last resort if they can't find anyone else to blame, they blame themselves. It's stupidity. There is no one to blame! Look inside and see it's empty, "a driverless bus". When you see non-self (Anatta), you see there is no one to blame; it's Anatta. The result is that you go back into your seat and just enjoy the journey. If it's a driverless bus, what else can you do? You sit there when you go through pleasant experiences, "just pleasant experiences that's all". You go through painful experiences, "just painful experiences, that's all". It's just a driverless bus.

You think that you have driven a course through these three months of the Rains Retreat, that your success or failure, your happiness or suffering is due to you. It's not, it's just nature. You've got no one to blame, and you've got no one to praise. Whatever has happened is just that; so stop shouting at the driver. Stop cursing the driver. There's no one there; you're wasting your breath. Just sit in your seat and "cop it sweet" [2]. When there are nice times, have fun. When there are unpleasant times, have fun. When you've got no one to blame, you might as well enjoy the journey. This is the simile of the driverless bus. "The Answer is 'There Is Nothing'"

I remember one of the teachings Ajahn Chah gave me personally. He used to come to our monastery at Wat Pah Nanachat every week because we had built a sauna for him there. He found the sauna beneficial as his health was failing by this stage. When he came it was great because he would give us a talk as well. That day he'd come to give a talk. We had fired up the sauna, and as soon as it was ready a few monks went to help him. I would help him sometimes; other times I let other people help.

This time, after giving a very inspiring talk to all the Western monks, he went off to the sauna, and I let some other monks look after him. I went to the back of the hall, sat outside, and had a deep, peaceful meditation. After coming out of my meditation I thought I would check out how Ajahn Chah was, to see if I could help him. Walking from the hall to the sauna, I saw he was already finished and was walking in the opposite direction with a couple of Thai lay people.

Ajahn Chah took one look at me, saw that I'd been in a deep meditation, and he said, "Brahmavamso, Why?"

I was completely surprised and confused, and replied, "I don't know".

Afterwards he said, "If anyone ever asks you that question again, the correct answer is, 'There is nothing'".

"Do you understand?" Ajahn Chah asked me.

"Yes," I said.

"No you don't," he replied.

So if you've been asking that question, Why? Why? Why?, I've given you the answer now. It's straight from a great meditation master, Ajahn Chah. The answer to the question "Why?" is, "There is nothing".

He was really great, Ajahn Chah, and he was correct. That will always remain with me, "There is nothing". This is emptiness. There is no doer. There is no knower, it's completely empty! To be able to get to that emptiness, encourage yourself by knowing that if you do find that emptiness, it's wonderful! All the Enlightened Ones that I have known have always been happy; they haven't regretted finding out that there's nothing there. No one has said to me, "I wish I hadn't found this out". It's liberating when you see there is nothing there. There is nothing to hold onto, and when you don't hold onto anything, there's no suffering any more.

All of the craving, all of the attachment, and all of the pain that arises because of those cravings and attachments, all have their origin in the illusion of self. That illusion of self creates a sense of "me" and a sense of "mine", all that I want, all the praise and blame, the "I am" conceit (Asmimana): "I am as good as the next person"; "I am better"; "I am worse". How many of you are still suffering because of comparing yourselves to someone else? You don't have to compare yourself to anybody. You're not there!

There is no more comparison anymore once you can give the "self" away. You don't even need to worry about what people think about you: because there is no one there to think about. How much suffering comes from worrying about what you think other people think about you, especially what I think about you because I'm the teacher here? What do I think about you? I don't think anything about you, because you are just not there!

Letting Go of Everything!

Another simile that I like to use is that as long as there is a hand you will go on picking up things. That's what a hand does. If you've got a hand and a nose, you'll pick your nose from time to time when no one is looking. When there is no hand, when you have cut the hand off, then you won't pick things up which create suffering for you and which create the burden of ownership.

Those of you who have started renouncing can understand that the more you give up, the freer you feel. You give up your house; you give up your car; you give up your possessions; you give up sex; you give up entertainment; you give up all these things, and you find the more you give up, the more liberated you are. It's like a person with a big rucksack on their back, carrying all these rocks, who has come to realize that they don't have to carry all these things. So on the journey up the mountain to Nibbana they keep throwing things out: throwing out all their possessions, throwing out their body, throwing out their thoughts, throwing out their worries and throwing out their illusion of self. On the last few steps up the mountain, they throw out the "doer", next they throw away the "knower". Then there is nothing left. When there is nothing left then they are free. When we say this is the path of renunciation, we really mean renouncing. When we say it's the path of letting go, it's really letting go of everything. Don't keep even a small thing left over.

The End

Have you the courage to do it? It's really worthwhile becoming Enlightened. It's to be recommended. Don't you want to become Enlightened? Don't you want to be free of all this? Haven't you had enough of samsara? Haven't you had enough of going to work? Haven't you had enough of this body, and pain, and going to the doctors, and having kids, and worrying about whether you're happy or sad, and all these thoughts which run through your mind and create problems and difficulties? One minute happy, the next minute sad. Haven't you had enough of all that?

Meditate! Make the mind still! Look at this thing we call the mind, let the lotus open up and see the most beautiful jewel there could ever be - nothingness. There's nothing better than nothingness, and there's no jewel greater than the Dhamma.

[1]. The Polymorphous Pali term Dhamma is used in three contexts in this paper, with a capital "D" to denote both the Teachings of the Lord Buddha and the Reality to which these teachings point and with a small "d" to denote "phenomena".

[2]. To "cop it sweet" is an Australian prison term which means roughly to do one's time gracefully without struggle, as opposed to "doing hard time".

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Source: Buddhist Society of Western Australia,
<http://www.dhammaloka.org.au>
<http://www.saigon.com/~anson/ebud/ebmed076.htm>

